

## **“This Scattered Light”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

November 15, 2020

### **Reading**

“Where the Light Enters You” by Omid Safi<sup>1</sup>

### **Sermon**

If I were to look back on my life, like Omid Safi in his poem, I could see many broken windows caused by loss of some kind.

I remember seeking out my mother when I was seventeen and heart-broken to be separated from my boyfriend at the time. He was my first love, and it tore me to pieces that he would be more than five hours away at a summer program even as we prepared to attend college in different states that fall. I collapsed on my parents’ bed and lay by my mother’s side filled with sorrow, sobbing and heaving because the pain was so great.

There was the time I was not chosen for a job I had applied for, and, not only was I not accepted, but the person the hiring let me know that I wasn’t chosen because of how unprofessionally I had been dressed for the interview. I lost the job opportunity and a little bit of my proud. Ouch.

More recently, there was the loss of growing life inside me when I had a miscarriage two and a half years ago. The grief of that loss burned brightly for many months and is still present now though it is more softly and dimly casting its light through that broken window.

There have been seemingly smaller losses as well - losing a favorite weekend brunch place and the ritual of waiting in line and ordering the same dish each time; losing a well-loved book that was left behind in the seat pocket on a flight from Burlington to Chicago; losing favorite neighborhood walks when I packed up my things and left

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<sup>1</sup> <https://onbeing.org/blog/where-the-light-enters-you/>. Omid Safi is a teacher committed to the intersection of liberation and spirituality. He teaches online at: <https://www.illuminatedcourses.com>.

Albuquerque, then Boston, then New Haven; and for many years, there was living through the Chicago Cubs losing yet another chance to make it to the World Series or losing the series itself. (There were lots of tears of happiness rather than sorrow shed on November 2, 2016.)

Life is filled with loss. I don't make that statement with a sense of tragedy, although some of the losses we human beings might suffer are genuinely tragic ones.

The fact that life is filled with loss is a simple truth.

We move through our lives opening ourselves with love and delight to people and places and things. And when life inevitably changes or doesn't go the way we might want, we experience loss and suffering.

We love, sometimes deeply, and we lose, sometimes with immense grief.

Loss is almost universally painful, though to different degrees depending on who or what is lost. Grief is a natural response to loss with its many, varied permutations, colors, phases, and movements.

Right now, with the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, we are all dealing with many losses. As cases have surged in just the last week alone here in Vermont and a new set of restrictions is put in place, I know that most all of us are feeling a renewed sense of loss. We are having to give up, for now, activities that have sustained us over the last several months - walks with friends and socially distanced gatherings. We are forgoing treasured holiday gatherings with loved ones some of whom perhaps you haven't seen in months or longer. Perhaps you are filled with anticipatory grief preparing for the possibility of in-person school being shut down. And, more acutely, you are perhaps seeing more family and friends directly impacted by Covid and even losing loved ones to this disease that is ultimately fatal for far too many.

The losses in this time are many and painful.

Loss can create wounds and scars as Omid Safi writes in his poem.

He writes, "I look at my own heart / and see scars / scars piled on scars." What we do with these wounds and scars matters greatly in our healing.

We may try to numb the pain of loss - through addictive behaviors like drinking or shopping or overmedicating. We may try to push the pain down and deny it is there, burying it with our busyness or being too quick to say we're fine and to move on.

Of course, over time, not tending to these wounds and turning away from this pain can lead to problems down the road. Pain untended can find ways to cause further pain and even harm.

The Quaker author and teacher, Parker Palmer, writes: "Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering."<sup>2</sup>

Too many of us have seen and experienced this on a personal level, perhaps in close relationships. And, we see this at a societal and global level with violence and war being all too prevalent in our human relations across tribes, ethnic and religious groups, and nation-states.

One of the hardest things we can do as human beings is to face the pain of living and losing with our souls laid bare. That doesn't mean facing this pain without support, but that we are willing to feel the pain of loss as it is.

Albert Huffstickler writes these lines in his poem, "The Cure,"

"let the pain be pain,  
not in the hope that it will vanish  
But in the faith that it will fit in,  
find its place in the shape of things  
and be then not any less pain but true to form."<sup>3</sup>

Accepting that life is full of loss is a first step in letting the pain be pain.

As was mentioned during our Chalice Lighting, we are in the midst of the Hindu festival of Diwali, the Festival of Lights. The well-known Hindu characters associated with Diwali are Rama and Sita from the epic tale, the Ramayana. There is triumph as they

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<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/blog/heartbreak-violence-and-hope-for-new-life/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hospiceofsb.org/blog/2018/4/19/the-cure-by-albert-huffstickler>

return from a long period of exile and lamps are lit to guide their way back to their village. Diwali celebrates light, truth, and the good.

Within Hinduism, there is a lesser known goddess named Akhilandeshwari (ah-kee-LAN-desh-wa-ree) who I also want to lift up today. The construction of this name in Sanskrit creates a double-negative and translates to the Never-Not-Broken Goddess. Akhilandeshwari represents the fragmentation and brokenness of human life. She recognizes that our lives fall apart. Yet, in this brokenness, the goddess is strong. She represents the ultimate wholeness in the brokenness.

An important part of how Akhilandeshwari is depicted is that she stands atop a crocodile, symbol of our human fears—of death, of failure, of inadequacy. Somehow, this never-not-broken goddess stands firmly upon her fears and uses them to transport her through change.<sup>4</sup>

We are also never-not-broken.

Healing comes, in part, from recognizing that this is true. Loss and the woundedness and brokenness that result from loss are a basic part of life.

Once we accept that we are never-not-broken we can turn our attention to the ways that our broken-heartedness is not the end of the story.

Omid Safi writes, “Some see the injury, / the pain / the hurt. / I caress the scars / gently. This is where the healing / and the light / entered me.”

As Leonard Cohen wrote and sang, “There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

Whether you believe this light comes from a Divine Source, or the Mystery that is the Universe, or is simply metaphorical, the light coming through those broken places can eventually, if not instantly, transform our hearts. We may need to filter that light first - with cleansing tears, or screaming in rage, or in quieter and gentler ways allowing the pain to have words and expression in the light of day through art and poetry, or therapy and conversation with friends.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Akhilandeshwari: <http://www.sutrajournal.com/akhilandeshwari-the-power-of-brokenness-by-laura-amazzone> and <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=5880>.

The pain of our losses illuminated can shape us into ever more loving people with ever more supple hearts.

Parker Palmer writes: “Suffering breaks our hearts — but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break. There’s the brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards, a heart that takes us down as it explodes and is sometimes thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain. Then there’s the supple heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.”<sup>5</sup>

To cultivate a supple heart, we must first recognize the brokenness in all things, the ways that losses remain with us. Then, we can begin to notice how there is also light getting through. If we allow ourselves to grieve, to let the pain be what it is and to be with the pain, then new possibilities emerge.

Our supple hearts are where we can care for the wounds and the scars with gentleness and compassion. Our supple hearts are where we can receive light and shine it back out brightly.

With hearts open wide, we can know that we are Never-Not-Broken and that the scattered light of our souls is beautiful beyond measure.

So may it be.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://onbeing.org/blog/heartbreak-violence-and-hope-for-new-life/>